

New York University School of Law Investigates Former Student Bar Association President's Statements on Israel and Hamas



Inquiry into Violation of School Policies

New York University School of Law has initiated an investigation into the actions of a former Student Bar Association president, Ryna Workman, over comments made in an online newsletter that attributed responsibility to Israel for the Hamas attacks. This investigation centers on whether Workman's statements breached the university's policies concerning discrimination and harassment. Law Dean Troy McKenzie confirmed the probe in an email sent to the media on October 16, 2023.

Workman's Controversial Statement

On October 10, Ryna Workman made a statement via the NYU Student Bar Association's online newsletter, claiming that "Israel bears full responsibility" for the deadly Hamas attack in Israel. Her comments immediately generated significant attention and controversy.

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Consequences for Workman

As a result of her statements, Workman faced repercussions in both her professional and academic life. Her job offer at the law firm Winston & Strawn was rescinded, and she has not responded to interview requests. The situation has since brought NYU Law School into the spotlight as it examines the potential policy violations.

The University's Stance

While Michael Orey, NYU Law spokesperson, indicated that federal law prohibits public discussion of students under disciplinary processes, he also emphasized that speech infringing upon the school's non-discrimination and non-harassment policies can lead to disciplinary action. Orey underscored that the law school remains committed to upholding the principles of free speech.

The Probe Begins

The law school's investigation became publicly known after Workman made her first statement following her October 10 post. In a statement made on Monday, she included an email from Law Dean McKenzie dated October 12. In this email, McKenzie stated that the school was looking into Workman's October 10 statement to understand better the circumstances and its impact on the university community. Additionally, the email indicated an examination of whether Workman misused her position as SBA president by posting the message without consulting other members of the executive board.

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Workman's Removal

In response to the controversy, Workman was removed from her position as SBA president and temporarily barred from sending group communications through NYU's email system, according to Dean McKenzie's email.

A Divisive Issue

In her Monday statement, Workman referred to the situation on the NYU campus as a "distraction" from the ongoing violence in the Middle East. She urged the community to stay focused on addressing the suffering of Palestinians in Gaza, describing it as a pressing concern.

Legal Challenge

Meanwhile, the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression (FIRE) addressed a letter to the NYU Law Dean on Monday, asserting that Workman's newsletter message constitutes protected political speech and should not warrant disciplinary action. FIRE argued that launching investigations against students for protected speech could have a chilling effect on campus discourse and that NYU's reaction sets a concerning precedent.

FIRE's letter stated, "NYU's reaction to Workman's speech sends a chilling message not only to Workman but to all students and faculty that they may face disciplinary action for engaging in core political expression." The legality of NYU's actions and their potential impact on free speech continue to be subjects of debate and discussion.

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